

Maryland moved one step closer to a possible wind farm off Ocean City with a federal agency's announcement Monday that it is looking for companies interested in erecting and operating turbines on the outer Continental Shelf, along the state's slice of the Atlantic Coast.

Federal officials have been working with governors of Atlantic Coast states, including Maryland's Martin O'Malley (D), to determine the feasibility of leasing sites in federal waters.

The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement posted the Request for Interest through the Federal Register's website. Responses and public comments are due Jan. 10.

O'Malley's administration has been assessing the economic and environmental potential for developing offshore renewable wind energy for about two years.

Industry responses will be used to measure interest in developing up to a one gigawatt windpower site offshore and to determine whether a lease would be awarded by a competitive or non-competitive process, bureau spokeswoman Leann Bullin said.

The proposed 175,000-acre-plus site starts about 10 nautical miles off Ocean City, with its eastern edge about 27 nautical miles from the resort community. It extends from south of the Delaware state line and veers slightly eastward off the coast of Maryland's part of Assateague Island.

Such a wind farm could support about 800 jobs in Maryland, once it begins operating, according to the O'Malley administration. Building it could generate 4,000 manufacturing and construction jobs and could draw manufacturing related to the turbines to the area, administration officials have said.

A lease for a wind farm off the coast off Massachusetts in Nantucket Sound was signed last month. Preliminary plans for that project, which were launched under a different process, began

in 2001. Called Cape Wind, the Massachusetts project's generating capacity is pegged at less than half of what is proposed off Maryland's Worcester County shore.

Maryland is the second state to move this far toward placing a wind farm off its shore under the Bureau's new process. Delaware was first and a task force including state officials is evaluating responses to its RFI.

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